

# Donald Morris / an analysis

## CIA doesn't use journalists as 'agents'



If newspapers know little or nothing about the intelligence community, the public knows even less about newspapers and where what they read actually comes from.

Only a small handful of giant newspapers (or chains) can afford to keep reporters stationed overseas. Most newspapers get the bulk of the foreign news they print from one of a very few "wire services," which do keep reporters in key positions to cover those areas. Such overseas reporters, whether for papers or wire services, tend to live and stay in capital cities and make periodic trips to cover the boondocks.

Both newspapers and wire services frequently have "relationships" with local journalists (either Americans or indigenous nationalists) who can supply copy if a story breaks in their area. A few of these people may actually be on small regular retainer fees; the great majority are simply paid space rates for what they produce. They are usually called "stringers," especially if they are on retainer; otherwise they are "correspondents."

**EVERY FOREIGN CITY** has a large collection of Americans who "write" — the larger the city, the larger the collection. (Paris is particularly fortunate.) Every one of these who has had so much as a letter to the editor published in The New York Times is apt to refer to himself as a "stringer." In some cases, the term is adopted by people on the basis of a "don't call us, we'll call you" letter sent them by some major newspaper. They write; they're ready to write for The Times. This, in their minds, makes them "stringers." Who knows? Lightning might strike.

Now then, what is the CIA interest in this hodgepodge of journalists? To begin with, the local CIA station consists of people living abroad for a number of years; they know the local American community, including the legitimate journalists and stringers. They also know (and avoid) the self-styled "stringers."

The legitimate press people, semi-permanent local residents, also know who the CIA officials are, because it is obvious. Never mind why; it is obvious. Official cover is not meant to "hide" CIA staffers from other American officials, the host government (to whom they have been declared in most countries) — or even the Soviets. Official cover simply allows the CIA staffer to live in the country without the host government having to admit openly it is harboring an intelligence official from a friendly nation.

**THE CIA PEOPLE** often see the local American press representatives socially, and they are usually good friends. They may discuss local politics, but they don't pump each other about sources — I've probably known 50 American journalists overseas who not only knew I was a CIA officer but also knew I was a Soviet specialist, but not one of them ever had an inkling as to what agents, assets or sources I was handling — nor did I ever regard any of them as "agents," "assets" or "sources."

A legitimate American journalist is of no value as an "espionage agent." He is known far and wide, and is conspicuous. He never talks to anyone who is not aware he is talking for overt publication, even if his identity is to be concealed. I doubt if the CIA has ever recruited a single American journalist as a source of FPI — foreign positive intelligence.

CIA officials overseas, consequently, have no interest in journalists for espionage; they just do not have access to the targets the intelligence community is assigned to cover. Journalists might be useful for a few support functions, but hardly one of these would justify recruiting him and making him an "agent."

**A REPORTER**, for example, might make a trip through Samarkand, where there is no American representation. No CIA field representative would bother to approach him, since he is going to publish his information anyway. If by some fluke he mentions something that is of intelligence interest, he might be approached — overtly — on his return to America, for further details. Such information would almost undoubtedly be "operational" (for internal consumption — such as hotel registration procedures), would never appear in an intelligence report, and does not make the reporter an "agent," an "asset" or even a "source."

The reporter might know some interesting diplomatic personnel. If the CIA wants to approach them, it certainly won't ask the reporter to introduce their "Mr. Jones," because foreign diplomatic personnel aren't children, and will draw the correct conclusions if Jones subsequently pitches them.

There is hardly a clandestine function that someone overseas can't fill better than a journalist, and in more than a decade overseas with the CIA, I can't think of a case of anyone approaching a legitimate, working American journalist for a specific clandestine purpose. It would have been silly, and I met remarkably few silly officials in the American intelligence community in the years I served.

*Part 2 of a 4-part series. Morris served with the CIA 17 years. He has been a columnist for The Houston Post since his retirement from government service in 1972.*